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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the research done on the college persistor and dropout. Section I reviews studies that tried to determine how a student's personality affected his persistence in college or his leaving before graduation, his social life, his ability to adapt to the college environment, his classroom behavior, and his ability to seek and accept help. Section II considers the research concerned with the relationship of the motivation and interest of the college student to his college success, including the establishment of occupational and educational goals and the role of the family and cultural background. Section III discusses the investigations of the relationship of scholastic aptitude scores and dropout rate. Section IV reviews research on the role that study skills and attitudes play in college persistence. (AF)

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COLLEGE PERSISTOR AND LEAVER : A REVIEW

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Does the college persister differ from leaver in the areas of

Personality,

Interest,

Aptitude,

Study Skills, and

Attitude?

This review of the research deals with studies done on paper and pencil personality instruments administered to those students who persisted in college and those who left. Motivation and goals of the college student and how these relate to college success are considered in the area of Interest. Aptitude, for the purpose of this investigation, includes those research studies based on standardized test scores, high school grade point average, rank in high school graduating class and how these items relate to college success. Study skills and attitudes toward study include such potential influences on college success as study methods, motivation for study, and attitudes toward scholastic success.

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS

Research studies are reviewed to help to determine whether the personality of a student affects his persisting in college or leaving before graduation. How personality affects his social life, his ability to adapt to the college environment, and his classroom behavior and ability to seek and accept help is considered.

Authors seem generally to agree that failure in college, with the obvious exception of low intellegence, is not due to lack of ability but to some internal conflict or external hindrance which prevents the student from applying himself to his work (Waller, 1964; Gibbs, 1966; Gelso and Rowell, 1967; Vaughn, 1967). These authors do not speculate as to the internal conflict or hindrance. However, Rose and Elton (1966), Suczek and Alfer (1966), and Williams (1966) indicate that students who come to resemble their environments while they are in college are more likely to persist and attain a degree than those who fail to become like their environment. The ability to adapt then, may be a factor in college success. Another possible factor may be endurance. The ability to attack a problem and stay with it appears throughout the research literature as an important factor in academic achievement (Pemberton, 1963; Gibbs, 1966; Vaughn, 1968; Trent and Medskar, 1968).

Little (1959) and Gibbs (1966) found another factor in persistance in college to be a strong desire for success. It may well be that lack of ability to adapt to the college environment, lack of endurance, and low desire to succeed are in conflict with persistance in college.

The leaver is found to differ from the persistor in that he is less sure about the role that college will play in his future.

Uncertainty in occupational and college major choice is a characteristic of students who are in academic difficulty at the time they leave college (Slocum, 1956; Lang, 1962; Pemberton, 1963; Vaughn, 1968). In a study of 1,949 University of Wisconsin freshmen of the year 1953, Little (1959) found that the persistors generally have a specific educational or occupational goal while the leavers' goals are ill-defined.

Friends play an important role in an individual's adjustment to college. The underachiever is usually not college oriented and has friends who are of like orientation and often are not college students (Trent and Medskar, 1968). It is not then surprising that negative reinforcement of college life results (Slocum, 1956). Pemberton (1963) points out that the underachiever is frequently distrustful of adult authority and is oriented toward his peer group.

The underachiever is more inclined to look for help from others than to work out a difficult problem on his own (Astin, 1964; Standing and Parker, 1964; Williams, 1966). Since many underachievers come from lower class backgrounds, Gottlieb (1962) may have shed some light on this group with his finding that lower class high achievers tend to lean toward adults for support in career planning. This dependency may be a social phenomenon.

Most of the findings concerning the dropout were in agreement with regard to the characteristic of sociability. Vaughn (1967) found the underachiever an outgoing student with a preference for social activity, and Gibbs (1966) described the unsuccessful student as tending to be gregarious and involved with the personal problems of others. There is a dissenting note, however,

in that Coambs (1967) found that sociability was not related to academic success.

Students who withdraw can be distinguished from persisting students on the basis of additional traits. The dropouts are more characterized by hostility and low scholarily orientation when compared with the persistor (Rose, 1965; Summerskill, 1965; Suczak and Alfert, 1966). Resistance to authority, dependency, and irresponsibility seem to be more characteristic of the students who withdrew from college (Brown, 1960; Heilbrun, 1963; Chambers, et al. 1965; Rose and Elton, 1966; Suczak and Alfert, 1966; Gelso and Rowell, 1967). Suczak and Alfert (1966) found that those students who were failing and withdrew from the University of California were less autonomous and intellectually oriented than those who withdrew while still in good academic standing. Summerskill (1965), in his review of the literature in The American College, found that the dropout clinically manifested rebelliousness, nonconformity, immaturity, worry and anxiety, social inadaquacy, non-adaptability, and lack of independence and responsibility. Other descriptive characteristics of the dropout-underachiever found in research include rigid, inflexable, lack of sympathy, impulsive, impatient, opinionated, and overactive (Trent and Ruyle, 1965; Gibbs, 1965).

Rose (1965) studied the defaulter, college students who withdrew voluntaily, and the dropouts. She found the defaulters high in social introversion and the dropouts significantly more hostile and high in anxiety and dependence. However, these studies all dealt with large group characteristics in terms of the average

student. When a group of underachievers was studied it was found that there simply is no average student. A cluster analysis of the OPI and the OAIS reported by Kisch (1968) found that 81 percent of the underachievers fell in one of four clusters. Cluster one indicated tendencies toward introversion, alienation, and social deviation; cluster two included individuals who were socially successful but academically indifferent; cluster three, the largest, included students who exhibited average adjustment, high creativity, nonconformity, restlessness, and a tense and impulsive nature; and cluster four consisted of individuals who were of feminine orientation, insecure, superficial in outlook, with unsatisfied affiliative needs.

In our society today words such as persistance, endurance, and responsibility have a very positive ring whether in reference to one's job, child-raising, or civic responsibility. Likewise, when one studies the student who succeeds in college as opposed to the student who leaves, it is not surprising that the characteristics of the persistor -persistance, endurance, and responsibility- are thought of as positive, while the leaver, who lacks these characteristics, is looked at negatively.

In our largely middle class society, where our high schools are geared, for the most part, to college preparation, parents strive for and expect their children to attend college. Even our institutions of higher learning are trying to find ways of attracting and holding more students; the increase in size and number of community colleges is a case in point. It follows then, that those who do not succeed in college or choose to leave are looked at negatively, and an act or behavior performed by a dropout is,

without exception, described in negative terms in the research reviewed.

The research reviewed above often describes the college dropout as unable to adapt to his college environment, and lacking in endurance and desire for success. He is also reported to be uncertain of the role college will play in his future. He is further described in such negative terms as hostile, dependent, rebellious, and having low scholarly orientation, immature, irresponsible, rigid, inflexable, implusive, impatient, opinionated, and overactive. On the other hand, a college persistor is described in such positive terms in the research reviewed as able to adapt to the college environment, possessing endurance and a desire for success, and having made an occupational and college major choice.

MOTIVATION AND INTEREST

The relationship of the motivation and interest of the college student to his college success is considered in the research reviewed. Establishment of occupational and educational goals and the role of family and cultural background are included.

Slocum (1956), Little (1959), and Summerskill (1965) report that the academically successful student tends to have established his goals. He knows the role college will play in his choice of vocation, while the dropout is found to be still undecided as to what his interests might be. He cannot see what is "in it" for him in college attendance, that is, an immediate return on his investment. It is reported by Gelso and Rowell, (1967) that if the academically unsuccessful student has decided on his goals, he is often impatient to get out and start working. He wants to

be independent and self supporting, and is impatient and does not see the need, either immediate or long range, for further education in his case.

Students who have a definite vocational choice in mind are more likely to persist in college (Little, 1959; Summerskill, 1965). Slocum's research (1956) lends further support to this feeling. In a study conducted at the State College of Washington involving 554 dropouts and 465 enrolled students, he found that uncertainty in relation to occupational choice or college major was significant, particularly for the male dropout and for those having academic difficulty at the time they left college. It is interesting to note here that the male's interest in college is generally of a vocational nature, whereas the female's vocational goals are somewhat less specific (Douvan and Kaye, 1965).

The hypothesis that to a large extent motivation is derived from family climate, is a subject of a number of studies related to college success. Trent and Ruyle (1965) found that students who continued in and/or completed their academic programs came from families which could be characterized as loving, encouraging, striving and interested. These authors contend that parents provide a prime source of academic motivation, and instillation of this motivation begins early in the child's life. Further the work of McClelland (1953, 1958), Atkinson (1958), Strodtbeck (1958), Rosen (1959), and McArthur (1960) would place the origin of achievement motivation very early in childhood. Gottlieb (1962) and Slocum (1956) add support to the foregoing in their discovery that regardless of achievement level, middle and upper class males

were more likely to report their parents as an influence than did males from the lower socio-economic groups. In each case students with a high level of achievement reported the greatest parental encouragement.

Little (1959) studied nearly thirty-five thousand high school graduates of the class of 1957 in the state of Wisconsin. An analysis of his study indicates that the typical top-ranking student who planned to go on to college had applied for a scholarship and was willing to borrow money so that he could attend. Moreover, his parents strongly encouraged him to attend college. This student wanted to increase his knowledge and skills, and he aspired to a professional or executive position. In contrast the typical top-ranking student who did not plan to attend college had not applied for a scholarship, indicated he would not borrow money to finance a college education, and his parents were less supportive of college attendance than the parents of the student who planned to attend college. He aspired to the position of executive or skilled worker, and he wanted to begin earning money.

There are inherent difficulties in measuring motivation, and this is further complicated when one tries to correlate these factors to college success. In the research reviewed, motivation is measured indirectly by such factors as whether or not the student has made a vocational or college major choice, if he has applied for a scholarship, whether he is willing to borrow money for his education, and what the attitudes of his family are concerning education and college attendance. If these factors are positive he is considered motivated, and these factors are then correlated

with success or failure in college.

In summary, the research reviewed tends to indicate that the student who persists in college registers positively for these factors; that is, he has made a vocational choice and knows the role college will play in accomplishing this goal. He has a family which is loving, encouraging, striving and interested in him, and which instilled academic motivation early in life. The persistor tends to be from the middle or upper socio-economic groups, has applied for a scholarship, is willing to borrow money for his college education, and aspires to a professional or executive position.

In contrast the college dropout tends to register negatively for these motivational factors; that is, he tends to be undecided as to occupational choice and does not know the role college will play in his future. He tends to come from a low socio-economic group; his family expresses less interest in his educational goals and offers little encouragement. The college dropout tends not to have applied for a scholarship to college and is unwilling to borrow money for a college education.

APTITUDES

There have been many investigations of scholastic aptitude scores and their relationship to subsequent dropping out of college. On the average the scholastic aptitude test scores for the dropouts are found to be lower than for those who graduate from college (Boyer and Koken, 1956; Summerskill 1965). However, high intelligence test scores did not ensure college attendance and graduation.

In fact, research found that approximately 35 percent of the students with IQ's of over 115 did not enter college (Berdie, 1954; White, 1954).

Rank in high school graduating class seems to be a predictor of eventual withdrawal from college moreso than it is a predictor of graduation (Eckland, 1964). Wolfle (1954) found that just over 50 percent of the students who graduated in the top 20 percent of their high school class entered college.

High school grade point index is generally considered to be a better predictor of college success than entrance examination scores. It can also be utilized to predict the first year college grade point index. The college dropout, when compared to the persistor, generally has a lower secondary school grade point index (Slocum, 1956; Endler and Steinberg, 1963 and Summerskill, 1965). Brown (1954) found that high school grades correlated at the .05 level of significance with college grades.

Reading courses have often been recommended for freshmen with a marginal predicted grade point index since it has ben found that dropouts have significantly lower reading test scores than persistors. The inability to read has been cited as the largest single cause of failure in college (Freehill, 1954; Hanks, 1954; Pattishall and Banghart, 1957; Anderson, 1959). Endler and Steinberg (1963) found that reading scores were second only to high school grade point index as a predictor of the first year college grade point index.

As the number of applicants to college increases, the colleges become more selective, and acceptance is determined by intellectual ability and academic aptitude. It is important, then, to be able to understand and assess the capability of the student to succeed in

college beyond the measured intellectural ability. The research reviewed tends to indicate that the college persistor has high scholastic aptitude test scores, a higher grade point average in high school, and graduated with a higher rank in his high school class than the student who leaves college before graduation. Also, the college dropout is found to have poor reading skills when compared with the persistor.

STUDY SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

The role study skills and attitudes play in persistance in college is considered in the research reviewed. Included in this area is the knowledge of study skills, scheduling of work, test taking abilities, and study attitudes.

In research reported by Trent and Medskar (1968) students - both persistors and leavers - were asked to report on difficulties experienced in college. Both groups reported learning how to study as the number one difficulty. In a study of persistors and dropouts, Righthand (1965) used the Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes and found that it significantly differentiated between the two groups.

Pemberton (1963) suggests that those students who are conscientious and systematic in their work habits tend to make higher grades. Thus, the scheduling of one's day, week or semester is considered to be a study skill. The full and complicated educational, social, and sometimes work schedule of the student demands planning for the successful carrying out of all the activities. Grande and Simons (1967) found this planning to be an important ingredient of academic success. In yet another study, order was

found to correlate positively with academic achievement (Lang, 1962).

Test taking, too, is somewhat of a study skill, and the knowledge of certain techniques of test taking can increase one's grades (Vaughn, 1968). This would include how to study, studying for certain types of tests, as well as the actual test taking. Vaughn (1968) found that dropouts lack these skills and have a greater carelessness in test taking than persistors.

One's motivation plays a strong role in the development of study skills. Motivation in the area of educational success generally dates back to the elementary school (Strodbeck, 1958), while study habits and attitudes developed in high school play a significant role in both high school and college achievement (Brown, 1954). The attitudes of high school seniors toward study remain relatively stable through the period of transition between high school and college (Brown, 1954; Trent and Ruyle, 1965).

Study habits and attitudes play a significant role in college achievement. It can be shown that students who do not develop good study habits tend to leave college, whereas students who are conscientious and systematic in their work habits tend to persist in college and make higher grades. However, it should be noted that they do not necessarily score higher on tests of general culture, and are not necessarily perceived by their instructors to be creative (Pemberton, 1963; Trent and Ruyle, 1965).

Generally then, it can be stated that a student who persists in college possesses better study skills and more appropriate attitudes toward study than does the college dropout. This includes paper and pencil study skill and attitude test scores, test taking ability, knowledge and use of time-commitment scheduling, and a history of good study habits developed before high school.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In looking at the personality of the persistor as compared with the leaver, research studies tend to show that the former has the ability to attack a problem and stick with it, has a strong drive for success, a sense of responsibility, is satisfied with college routine, is conscientious and systematic in work habits, resembles his environment, and thinks independently and objectively.

The leaver tends not to stick to a given task, is less satisfied with college routine, is less sure of the role college will play in his future, is less able to distinguish betwen the important and the unimportant, and is less effective in scheduling and carrying out his daily activities. The leaver tends to be a careless test taker, often lacks the ability to adapt to the college environment, and lacks self discipline. He tends to be rigid, inflexable, opinionated, nonacademically oriented, and distrustful of adult authority. He often has a preference for social activity rather than study.

The motives and interests of the persistor in college are related to his success. Research studies specify that persistors tend to have a definite vocational choice, and come from families that are interested in and encourage them in their higher educational plans. The leaver has ill-defined goals, and is uncertain of his occupational and college major choices. Too, the family is not supportive with regard to educational endeavors.

Students who have definite goals score higher on the SAT-verbal, have a higher grade point index in high school, and finish in the

upper ranks of their high school graduating class. Leavers usually are characterized as having tentative vocational goals, and an intellectual capacity below that of the persistor. They have lower secondary school grades and significantly lower reading ability test scores.

The values of the leaver tend to be different from those of the persistor. The leaver tends to seek immediate practical payoff for his energies, whereas the persistor is less interested in the gratification of immediate needs.

Because of the high value placed on education in our society, a student who leaves college before graduation is often described in negative terms in the research. Contrary to this it might be suggested that if a college education is not the route that a student needs to follow to reach his goal, he need not be considered a failure. A more objective way must be used to study and describe the college dropout. The dropout's goals and value systems should be considered when evaluating his decision to leave.

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